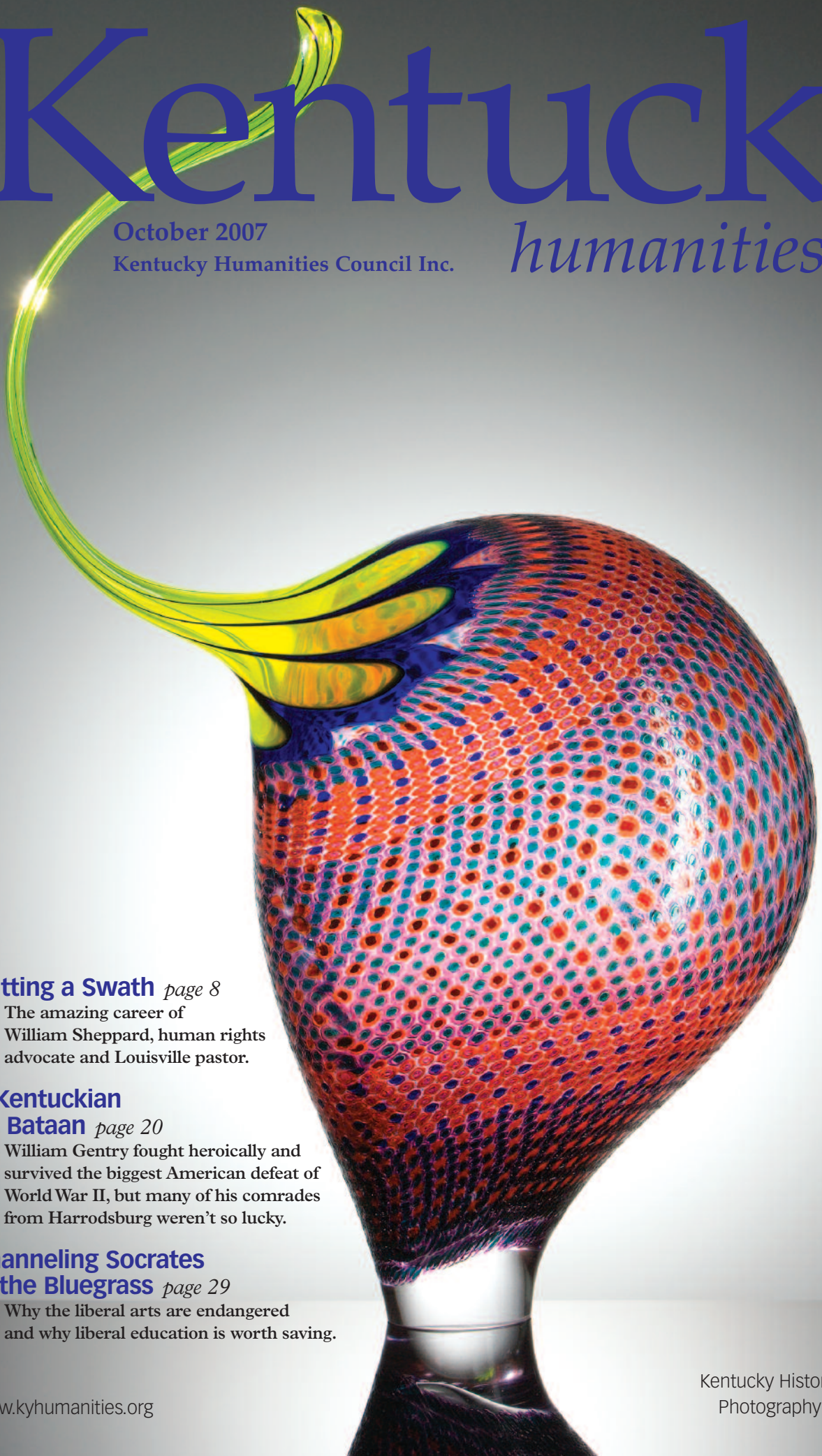
$3.00

Kentucky humanities

October 2007
Kentucky Humanities Council Inc.



Plus:
Kentucky History and Travel Notes
Photography by Keith Auerbach

www.kyhumanities.org

BY CHRISTOPHER L. KOLAKOWSKI

Willliam Gentry was a member of a National Guard unit from Harrodsburg that ended up in the middle of the biggest American defeat of World War II. He survived, but many of his comrades didn't.

A Kentuckian on Bataan

A small crowd gathered in Harrodsburg's Spring Hill Cemetery on May 6, 2000, to lay one of the town's better-known citizens to rest. Many of those in attendance were family members, friends, and people from his church. Among the mourners that day were members of a very exclusive club, one whose numbers could only dwindle: the men of Company D, 192d Tank Battalion, who had survived the Battle of Bataan, the Bataan Death March, and three long years in Japanese prisons. These men, known collectively as the Harrodsburg Tankers, had come to bury one of their officers: William H. Gentry.

Company D of the 192d Tank Battalion was a Kentucky National Guard unit that had been in existence since the early 1930s. It was based in Harrodsburg, drawing most of its membership from that town and Mercer County. Sent to the Philippines just before the outbreak of the Second World War, the company and its battalion won numerous citations and performed great feats before succumbing to the Japanese tide. One of the most prominent and decorated of the Harrodsburg men was First Lieutenant William Gentry, who on one occasion saved the American forces in the Philippines from destruction and won the first U.S. tank-vs-tank victory against Axis tanks in the war.

Proviso School Bataan Research Project

Lt. William Gentry of Harrodsburg, 1941. His comments in this article come from an interview in the Oral History Collection of the Kentucky Historical Society.

WILLIAM Gentry was born in Mercer County on November 19, 1918, the youngest of three children of James and Harriet Gentry of McAfee. He graduated from McAfee High School, and there befriended two future comrades: Archibald Rue and James Van Arsdall. All three joined the National Guard in 1936, lured by the uniforms, the steady paycheck, and the dim prospects for employment elsewhere during the Great Depression. They couldn't have imagined what fate had in store for them.

Private Gentry was assigned as a mechanic to the local National Guard unit, the 38th Tank Company in Harrodsburg. The 38th was a relatively new unit, formed in 1932. It was the only tank unit in Kentucky's National Guard, and one of a very few in the entire United States. This gave the men some pride and feeling of exclusivity. Almost all of the unit's members came from Mercer County, and its roster read like a list of well-known local families. The company had no armory—it met above a restaurant for weekly drill. The tanks (old World War I era models) were housed at members' homes, and soldiers were paid for the time it took to drive back and forth to drill. The 38th passed its inspections every year and frequently paraded at events like the Kentucky Derby. In 1937, the company responded to flooding in Frankfort, and later helped quell labor unrest in Eastern Kentucky.

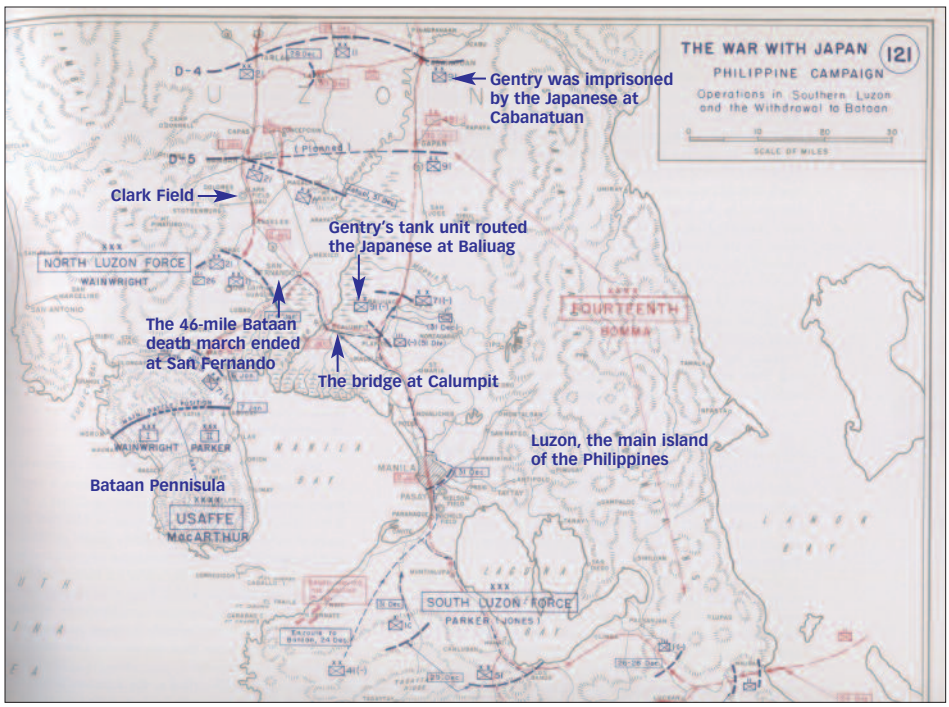
This painting vividly portrays a U.S. Stuart tank in action in the Philipines. This tank is from the 194th Battalion, a National Guard unit to which many of the Harrodsburg tankers were assigned.

In September 1940, the 38th Tank Company was officially redesignated Company D, 192d Tank Battalion. This change placed them into a larger unit with Guardsmen from Wisconsin, Illinois, and Ohio. All four companies first met in November 1940 when the Harrodsburg men were called into Federal service and sent to Fort Knox for training. Just before the unit shipped out for Knox, those who wished were given discharges. "All the men who left Harrodsburg… were volunteers," Gentry later remembered proudly. By then a Staff Sergeant and trained radioman, Gentry was part of a group that numbered five officers and 86 enlisted men. Conditions were primitive: "When we arrived at Fort Knox, the buildings were not complete, and the area was covered with a sea of mud . . . the mud would be six inches deep on the barracks floors." Manpower shortages forced sergeants like Gentry to pull latrine duty, a task usually reserved for the lowest-ranking private.

After just a few weeks at Fort Knox, Sergeant Gentry entered an officer training program and was commissioned a Second Lieutenant in early 1941. He was assigned to the 192d's new Headquarters Company as communications officer. He supervised the 192d's radiomen, taught radio communications and electronics at Fort Knox, and assisted with processing incoming draftees: "We were able to handpick the men that we wanted in our battalion to fill us up . . . we were able to build a battalion of extremely good men."

During the spring and summer of 1941, the 192d coalesced as a unit under the command of Colonel Bacon Moore, the former commander of Company D. For the first time, each unit received a full complement of modern M1 and M2 tanks. Officers and men became proficient with weaponry and tactics "to the nth degree," according to Gentry. In September 1941, the 192d participated in large-scale maneuvers in Louisiana, where the weapons, units, and men of the modern U.S. Army were tested under simulated wartime conditions. A group of officers from Washington (including General George Patton) observed the maneuvers, and they concluded that the 192d was an outstanding unit and ready for overseas service.

By the fall of 1941 tensions with Japan and Germany were high, and U.S. garrisons around the world were being strengthened in expectation of hostilities. A U.S. embargo of Japan was pushing that nation's resources



West Point Atlas of American Wars, Author's Collection

Lingayen Gulf is off the map to the north, and Japanese troops are marked by red arrows. Cabanatuan is along the map's north edge, and Fort Stotsenburg/Clark Field is to the west near the Zambales Mountains. Calumpit and Plaridel are in the center of the map, and Gentry's unit is marked with the armor symbol.

to the breaking point, while in the Atlantic the U.S. Navy fought an undeclared war against German submarines. The largest U.S. garrison overseas was in the Philippines, where General Douglas MacArthur, commander of the U.S. Army Forces in the Far East (USAFFE) was pleading for reinforcements and equipment. The Philippine Army had been called into U.S. service in July of 1941, and was feverishly training to fight the Japanese.

After the Louisiana maneuvers, the Harrodsburg men knew they were headed overseas, but the destination initially was a mystery. Less than an hour after first seeing the code word for their destination (PLUM), Gentry and his comrades had figured it out – Philippines, Luzon, Manila. As the men prepared to go, the army forcibly discharged all men judged too old for overseas service, including Colonel Moore at age 56. Colonel Theodore Wickord of Illinois, age 34, took his place. Anyone who did not want to go overseas could get an automatic transfer, but Gentry noted that "again, the 66 who had left Harrodsburg going to the Philippine Islands, volunteered for the second time for the mission we had to accomplish."

THE 192d went by rail to the West Coast and sailed from San Francisco in early November 1941. For 29 of the 66 Harrodsburg men, that was the last time they would see the United States. After an uneventful voyage, the 192d landed in Manila on November 27, 1941. One Filipino general wrote at that time that "the war for all practical purposes is on in the Orient," and his opinion was shared throughout MacArthur's USAFFE. The tankers' greeting at the dock brought home to the men that they were in the thick of it: "Draw your firearms immediately; we're under alert. We expect a war with Japan at any moment."

The battalion was stationed at Fort Stotsenburg, one of the largest supply depots in the Philippines. Next to Fort Stotsenburg was Clark Field, the largest airfield in the islands and one of only two that could support heavy B-17 bombers. The Kentuckians soon developed unofficial ways of informing the folks back home they had arrived safely. Gentry later remembered "that within a very few hours [of the arrival] at Fort Stotsenburg we were in contact with the States, using the ham band… In fact, we were in contact with Dix Dam right on Herrington Lake within a matter of two or three hours after we had our first radio in operation. In fact, I sent a message to my mother."

The 192d now joined the 194th Tank Battalion (two companies of West Coast National Guard tankers that had been in the islands since September) and formed the Provisional Tank Group under Colonel (later Brigadier General) James R.N. Weaver, a conscientious officer determined to prepare his men for the coming struggle. (Most of the Harrodsburgers—Company D of the 192d—were transferred to the 194th to fill out that unit, but Lieutenant Gentry stayed with the 192d as communications officer.) On paper, the Provisional Tank Group looked fierce, numbering some 998 officers and men with 108 tanks. As the men unloaded their M3 Stuart tanks, however, they soon discovered that the designers had not reckoned with prevailing conditions in the Philippines. For one thing, the Stuarts were too heavy for most of the bridges on Luzon. Most of the tankers had trained on earlier models—they needed practice on the new M3s. Ammunition, gasoline and spare parts were misplaced or not available. As General Weaver later said, "Accordingly, tank operation was not accomplished to familiarize the personnel – 35% new to any kind of tanks, all new to the M3 tank." Despite these limitations, Weaver's group was posted around Clark Field in early December to bolster the air defense of that area.

FOR William Gentry, the Second World War began with a radio report from Hawaii in the early morning hours of December 8, 1941 (because of the International Date Line, Manila is almost a full day ahead of Honolulu). The tankers assumed their duty stations while Gentry's radiomen gathered what information they could about the Japanese bombing of the U.S. base at Pearl Harbor. Despite pleas to MacArthur's headquarters, the 35 B-17s at Clark Field did not receive orders to strike. As a precaution, all of Clark Field's more than 100 planes took off that morning to avoid getting caught on the ground by a Japanese raid. Seeing no enemy planes after several hours, the Americans landed and by 11:45 A.M. most pilots and antiaircraft crewmen were having lunch. At that

moment, a Japanese raid hit Clark Field. Lieutenant Gentry and his comrades were in the mess hall. "Most of the men . . . stood there with their mouths open, observing the planes, watching the bomb bays open and the bombs start to fall." Japanese fighters zoomed in and strafed the field, despite American antiaircraft and tank fire. In less than an hour, Clark Field was knocked out of action, with over 53 planes destroyed against just seven Japanese planes shot down. Seventeen of the 35 precious B-17s were smashed. At a stroke, MacArthur's forces had virtually lost their air cover.

The next weeks were spent preparing for the inevitable Japanese invasion of Luzon. "From [December 8] on we never saw the inside of a barracks," Harrodsburger Ralph Stine recalled. Japanese air raids harassed the tankers as they moved around Luzon to bolster the American and Filipino (Filamerican) infantry units defending likely landing beaches. MacArthur's command was divided in two: the North Luzon Force under Major General Jonathan M. Wainwright, and the South Luzon Force under Major General George M. Parker. The 194th (including the Harrodsburg company) supported Parker's command, while William Gentry and the 192d moved north to assist Wainwright's forces on the beaches at Lingayen Gulf. The 192d's men began improvising the tactics required by their new defense-oriented mission: "Our training had all been offensive training. I can't remember any particular phase of our training at Fort Knox that we ever had defensive action; it was always offensive," remembered Gentry.

On December 22, 1941 General Masaharu Homma's Japanese 14th Army began landing at Lingayen Gulf in northwestern Luzon. Two days later another force landed on the Bicol Peninsula in southeastern Luzon. MacArthur planned to defend on the beaches and throw the invaders back into the sea, but Filamerican counterattacks on the 22nd and 23rd failed due to poor reconnaissance, poor coordination, and poor logistics. Much of the 192d was kept out of action, but a platoon from Company B (Illinois National Guard) met Japanese tanks on the 22nd and suffered one tank knocked out and four damaged out of five engaged. Japanese tanks proved to have heavier guns (47mm v. American 37mm) and sloped armor which helped deflect shells. This was the first tank-against-tank action by U.S. forces in the war, and it was a decisive defeat for the Americans.

By Christmas Eve it was apparent that the Lingayen Gulf landing represented the main Japanese effort, and it was aimed at Manila, about 140 miles to the southeast. The 194th moved to the North Luzon Force to help stall the 14th Army's advance. MacArthur also realized that his plan to defend the beaches had failed; the only hope now was to withdraw in the face of the Japanese advances. Prewar planners had prepared a scheme for withdrawing to the Bataan Peninsula and Corregidor Island (on the western end of Manila Bay), and on Christmas Eve MacArthur ordered the plan put into effect.

The withdrawal plan, known as WPO-3, called for an intricate series of delaying actions as the North Luzon Force held open the road to Bataan from southern Luzon. The North Luzon Force was to occupy successive defense positions while Parker's South Luzon Force raced north and west around Manila Bay to reach Bataan by New Year's Eve. If Wainwright's men could not hold, the southern contingent would be cut off and annihilated. American armor would play a critical part in delaying the Japanese advance; as Illinoisan William Hauser said later, "There would have been no Bataan if the retreat hadn't been covered by the tanks."

The 192d went by rail to the West Coast and sailed from San Francisco in early November 1941. For 29 of the 66 Harrodsburg men, that was the last time they would see the United States.

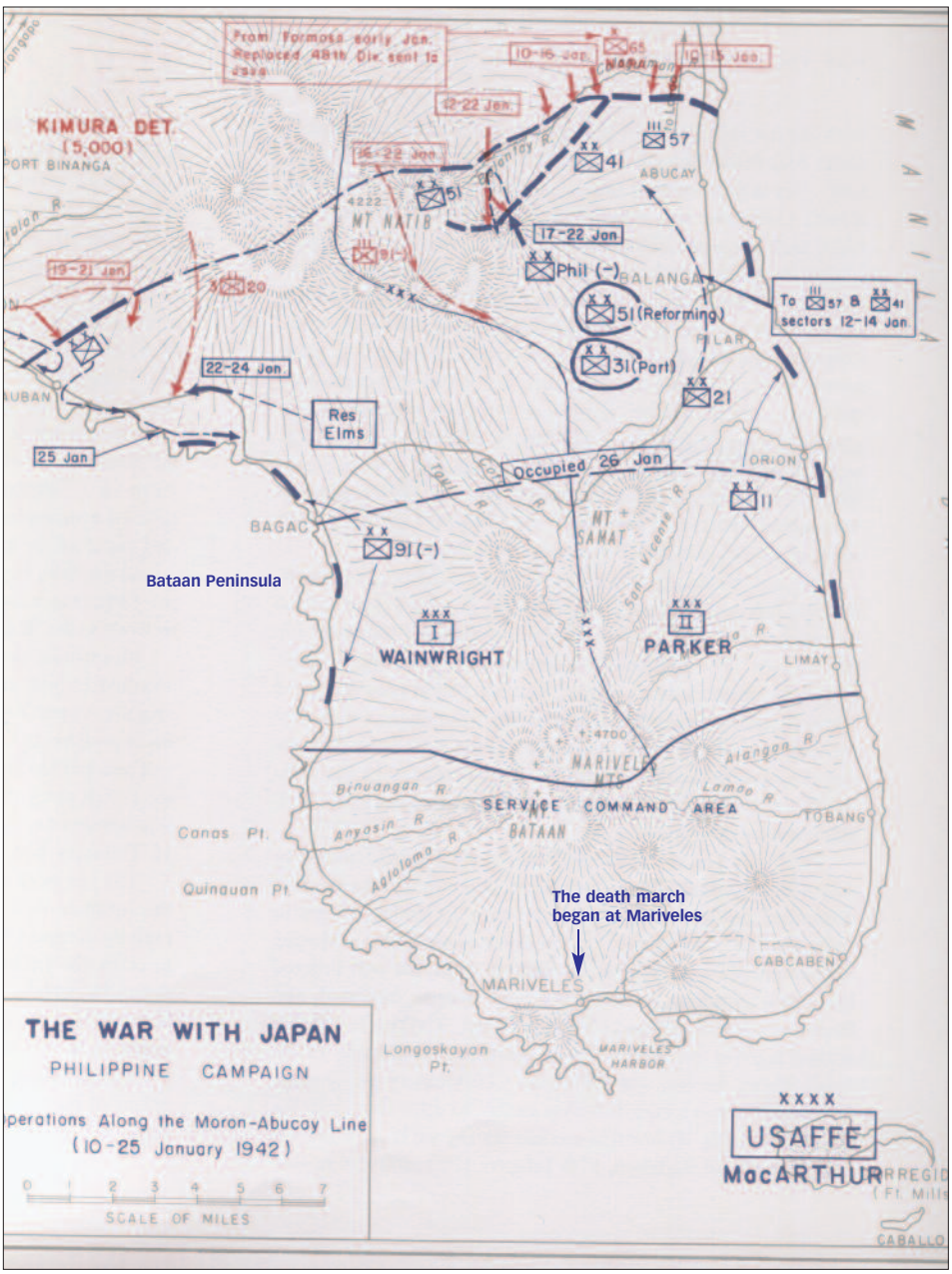
JUST before WPO-3 was activated, Lieutenant Gentry was sent to Company C of the 192d to "help out" the Ohio officers. He took command of the company and became responsible for helping shield the North Luzon Force's eastern flank. The southward-flowing Pampanga River divided the Filamerican lines in half. The direct road to Manila was on the east side of the river along with the key road junctions of Plaridel and Baliuag and the bridge at Calumpit. The forces east of the river (two Filipino infantry divisions plus part of the 26th Cavalry Regiment and Gentry's tank force) would face the main Japanese effort to capture Manila.

One of the major defense lines was at Cabanatuan, a place that would later mean much more to all the Americans on Luzon. At first, the Americans had problems communicating with the Filipinos, many of whom had never seen a tank before. The tankers were often the last to pull back, shielding the infantry operations. As Gentry later related, "We spread out on a wide front, some times as many as twenty-five miles with a single company [15 tanks], with no support to speak of." Officers and men alike went days without sleep, and supplies (especially gasoline) were sometimes hard to come by, but despite these hardships the tankers successfully held off the Japanese.

Wainwright's men slowly withdrew southward during the last week of 1941, and by New Year's Eve the tankers and infantry were just north of Plaridel and still waging a successful defense. The South Luzon Force arrived and began crossing the Calumpit Bridge, detaching some troops to hold Plaridel. Once the columns had crossed the river, the Plaridel force (including Gentry's tanks) would withdraw and the bridge would be blown by 6 A.M. on New Year's Day 1942. It appeared that the withdrawal to Bataan would be completed without a hitch.

Suddenly a command misunderstanding upset this careful design. General MacArthur gave Brigadier General Albert

West Point Atlas of American Wars, Author's Collection



After MacArthur's forces fell back to the middle of the Peninsula on January 26, the Japanese attempted landings at Canas Point, Quinauan Point, and Longoskayan Point but were repelled in the Battle of the Points. The Battle of the Pockets took place along the Toul River.

M. Jones command of all troops east of the Pampanga River, but for some reason General Wainwright was not informed of this change. At noon on New Year's Eve, thinking everything was clear, Wainwright ordered the infantry at Plaridel to cross the bridge. But General Jones still had troops on the road to the Calumpit Bridge, and Wainwright's order removed their protection just as the Japanese showed signs of mounting an attack. The situation was critical—something had to be done to keep the road open.

General Jones turned to the only force available to him: two platoons of Company C, 192d Tank Battalion under Lieutenant William Gentry, numbering 10 tanks. The tankers were sent north of Plaridel to the village of Baliuag to delay the Japanese as long as possible. Gentry and his men encountered enemy patrols on the way north, so "we knew that they were well on us." As the armor arrived they found that the Japanese were securing the northern and eastern approaches to Baliuag, and had lookouts in a church steeple.

One platoon was placed south of town, while Gentry took the other into Baliuag and disguised the tanks in nipa huts, with the cannons pointing out windows. By mid-afternoon the ambush was ready as the Japanese started to move into town. Gentry was about to spring the trap when a major from headquarters drove into Baliuag and alighted at Gentry's hut. In a tone that must have strained military decorum, Gentry explained that "we were sitting there looking at a collection of Jap tanks out in the field and, also, the Jap lookout in the church steeple was quite excited as to why he was there… the only thing for [the major] to do was to get in the jeep and drive out of town just as though nothing happened." Chastened, the major did as he was told and sped southward.

At about 4 P.M. the American tanks opened fire, surprising the Japanese tanks and infantry. The platoon south of town drove the enemy into the streets of Baliuag, whereupon Gentry's tanks exploded out of their hiding places. For the next two hours, a wild melee ensued. Gentry later crowed, "We were chasing the tanks up and down the streets of the town, under buildings, through buildings. We… left the town burning" and put all the Japanese tanks and infantry to panicked flight. When Company C pulled back that evening, eight Japanese tanks had been destroyed without a single loss on the American side. Gentry's tank accounted for four of the destroyed Japanese tanks. The only U.S. casualty, said one participant, "was a sprained ankle when one of the boys attempted to get off the tank in a hurry to tell his part of the story after the fight was over." The men had every right to be excited: Harrodsburg native William Gentry and his Ohioans had just won the first American tank-vs-tank victory over Axis forces in the Second World War.

GENTRY'S success stalled the Japanese long enough for all Filamerican forces to pull across the Calumpit Bridge, and by 6 A.M. on New Year's Day the bridge was blown. After one more short stand, the tankers retired into Bataan and had their first rest and refit since the war started. By January 7, 1942, MacArthur's forces stood ready on Bataan to repel any further Japanese advances. However, in the hasty withdrawal not enough food made it to the

At about 4 P.M. the American tanks opened fire, surprising the Japanese tanks and infantry. The platoon south of town drove the enemy into the streets of Baliuag, whereupon Gentry's tanks exploded out of their hiding places. For the next two hours, a wild melee ensued.

peninsula in time; the Bataan garrison immediately went on half rations.

MacArthur's line stretched across the peninsula's base from Abucay to Mauban, with a break around rugged Mount Natib. Wainwright's force, renamed I Corps, held the western sector while Parker's command (II Corps) took over the east. The Japanese repeatedly attacked the Abucay position head on, but failed to break through. Flanking operations over Mt. Natib finally succeeded in driving the Filamerican forces back. On January 22 MacArthur ordered a retreat to a new position halfway down the peninsula, running from Orion to Bagac. Four days later his forces were in position and reorganizing for their last stand on Bataan.

Flushed with victory, Homma's men closed with this new line and attacked immediately. Most of the assaults were repulsed after several days of intense fighting, but a deep penetration in Wainwright's line (later known as the Pockets) took three weeks to wipe out with the assistance of Gentry and the rest of the 192d Tank Battalion.

In addition to the frontal attacks, Homma sent several battalions of infantry to land on the west coast of Bataan and smash supplies and rear-area installations. These landings (named the Points) were met with a scratch force of Philippine Scouts, pilots converted to infantry, and other rear-area troops. Gentry's company also assisted with eliminating these beachheads, which the Japanese defended to the last man. He later described the tactics used by Company C's Lieutenant John Hay and some of his men: "[Hay] would force the Japanese into their foxholes [with the tanks] and, as they passed over the foxholes, the men walking behind [each tank] would leave each one a present of a hand grenade." By mid-February the exhausted Japanese pulled back to regroup, and for the next six weeks a period of calm settled over Bataan.

The defeat of the Points and Pockets attacks was the first time Allied forces had stopped a Japanese offensive, and was the first American victory in the Pacific War. More importantly for MacArthur, the victory ensured the continued survival of the Bataan forces for the time being. However, poor rations soon began to wither the men, and disease also took its toll. By April 1 the Bataan garrison's 76,000 men were down to only 25% effectiveness. They also had a new commander: MacArthur departed for Australia on March 11, 1942, turning over his command (renamed U.S. Forces in the Philippines, or USFIP) to General Wainwright.

The final Japanese blow fell on Good Friday April 3, 1942. By the evening of April 6 the Luzon Force's line was irreparably broken; Japanese units raced down the east coast of Bataan. Their objective was Mariveles, a harbor at Bataan's southern tip where the headquarters, hospitals, and supplies of the Luzon Force (previously the Bataan garrison) were located. Troops gathered around Mariveles for a last stand, but everyone sensed the end was near. To save his men from massacre, General

U.S. Army Signal Corps

Troopers of the 26th Cavalry Regiment move past a Stuart tank belonging to the 192d Battalion during the retreat to Bataan. An Illinois survivor said the tank is either from Company B or Company C of the 192d. Company C was the one Gentry led to victory at Baliuag.

Edward P. King surrendered his Luzon Force on April 9, 1942—the largest capitulation in U.S. history.

GENTRY and his tankers were on the west side of Bataan during all this, and participated in the effort to repel the Japanese attacks. On the morning of the 9th the men received the code word CRASH and destroyed all their tanks, weapons, and other equipment. After two days of waiting the Japanese took charge and sent the men to Mariveles. There they began the Bataan Death March, one of the worst atrocities of the Pacific War. Of the 76,000 Filamericans who surrendered on April 9, only 54,000 survived the Death March—a nightmare that began on April 10, 1942 and lasted two weeks. It consisted of a 46-mile forced march from Mariveles to San Fernando, followed by a train ride north to Capas. The surviving prisoners then walked the final eight miles to a prison camp at Fort O'Donnell, a former American base.

Gentry, wracked with malaria, spent 11 days on the march with only one rice ball to eat and seven canteens of water to sustain him in the tropical heat. He would later say that "three or four days of it I don't even remember. The fellows in the unit took turns carrying me along the road." His men undoubtedly saved Gentry's life, as most stragglers were shot or left for dead on the roadside.

After several weeks at Camp O'Donnell, the American prisoners moved to a new compound at Cabanatuan. There they joined other Americans from Corregidor, which had surrendered on May 6. Filipino prisoners were released as part of a general amnesty. In October 1942, Gentry was moved to a farm on the southern island of Mindanao, where he grew rice as a forced laborer. Although the rations were somewhat better than at Cabanatuan, Mindanao was a "nightmarish memory" for those who were there. On June 6, 1944, Gentry's ill health compelled a return to Cabanatuan. He caught a case of dysentery later that year which kept him at the camp while thousands of his more able-bodied comrades were sent to away on Hell Ships to Formosa, Japan, or China.

To save his men from massacre, General Edward P. King surrendered his Luzon Force on April 9, 1942—the largest capitulation in U.S. history. Of the 76,000 Filamericans who surrendered, only 54,000 survived the Death March.

Meanwhile U.S. forces had advanced back toward Luzon. MacArthur, fulfilling his famous promise to return, landed at Lingayen Gulf on January 9, 1945, and within three weeks had driven to near Cabanatuan. Freedom came to William Gentry on January 30, 1945, when the 6th U.S. Ranger Battalion liberated the camp and evacuated him and over 500 of his fellow prisoners to American lines, an event later immortalized in the 1945 film *Back to Bataan* and 2005's *The Great Raid*. Three weeks later he was sent back to the United States, and spent several months in hospital before being promoted to Captain and discharged from the Army. For his actions on Luzon and Bataan, Gentry was awarded two Silver Stars, one Bronze Star, one Purple Heart, the Philippine Defense Medal and the Good Conduct Medal.

CAPTAIN Gentry went home to Harrodsburg after the war, one of only 37 men from the original Company D to return from Bataan. He spoke about his experience shortly after returning home and friend Louise Dean remarked that "as always, he had that wonderful smile." Gentry later married and had two sons and a daughter. He worked at Corning Glass in Harrodsburg for 25 years, and Dean remembered him as "a good and honest man" with "a twinkle in his eye for all whomever he came to know."

Gentry was active in veteran's organizations, and appeared at the dedication of a monument to the Harrodsburg Tankers in 1961. Like a good officer should, he checked on the other survivors to see how they had adjusted to life back home in Kentucky. He transferred to a Corning facility in Danville, Virginia, and later retired to Florida. William H. Gentry died in Roanoke, Virginia on April 25, 2000. He was buried in Harrodsburg on May 6, the 58th Anniversary of the surrender of Corregidor.

For students of Kentucky's military heritage, the 192d Tank Battalion and the Harrodsburg Tankers rank as a significant part of the state's legacy. In 1945 the U.S. Army awarded two Presidential Unit Citations to the Provisional Tank Group for their actions in the Philippines. William Gentry and his comrades played a key part in earning these honors, and the citation is the last word on their careers: "This unit contributed most vitally… to the protraction of the operations and the successful withdrawal… These units [also] maintained a magnificent defense and through their ability, courage, and devotion to duty contributed in large measure to the prolonged defense of the Bataan Peninsula." ●

Christopher L. Kolakowski has spent his career interpreting and preserving American military history. He has worked for the National Park Service and the Civil War Preservation Trust, and is now executive director of the Perryville Battlefield Preservation Association. Kolakowski holds an M.A. in Public History from the State University of New York at Albany. He has written numerous articles. This one is based on a talk he currently offers through the Kentucky Humanities Council's Speakers Bureau.

Note on Sources: An interview with William Gentry is in the Oral History Collection of the Kentucky Historical Society. The author wishes to thank Jim Opolony of the Proviso School (Illinois) Bataan Research Project for pictures and sources, and Louise Dean of Harrodsburg for sharing her memories of William Gentry. Stuart Sanders and Don Rightmyer of the Kentucky Historical Society provided sources and encouragement, as did Colonel Arthur Kelly of Frankfort. Special thanks to Jerry Sampson and the Harrodsburg Historical Society for their assistance and for helping keep the 192d's memory alive.